

Crimean crosswords. Autonomy's parliament and government back on settling scores

No. 26/227, June 25, 2001

With persistence that is worth a better use, about once a year, in May or June the Crimean parliament tries to settle scores with the Crimean government by forcing the to resign.

On June 20, 2001, the Crimean parliament votes 55 out of almost 100 to approve an appeal to President Leonid Kuchma urging him to agree to the dismissal of Crimean Prime Minister Serhiy Kunitsin. The parliamentary session, interrupted with fights and voices abuse, bitterly resembled the previous Crimean parliament.

Commenting on the parliament's decision, its Speaker and leader of Crimean Communists Leonid Grach argued that it was caused by the refusal of the Crimean government, the Council of Minister, to report to the parliament about the government's performance in 2000 (UNIAN, June 20, 2001). In their appeal to President Kuchma, Crimean MPs reminded him that on May 3, 2001, speaking at a conference on social and economic development of the Crimea in Simferopol, he had criticized the Council of Ministers for a number of major failures to respond to challenges in the social sphere, to promote industrial restructuring and reform the agrarian sector and, thus, reduction of outputs in the autonomy's economy. Then First Vice Prime Minister in the Yushchenko government Yuri Yekhanurov explicitly stated that «certain positive changes in the economy did not contribute to stabilization of social and political situation in the Crimea» and added that the issues of the social sphere «still remained outside the government's priorities». He argued that «compared to 1999, personal incomes increased by 28%, while Ukraine's average was 40%» (UNIAN, May 3, 2001).

Shortly before the recent session of the parliament some sources leaked information about a closed meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Crimea that had resolved to call its annual report back from the Crimean parliament (where it had been sent on January 29, 2001) and to postpone the report till autumn. The Council of Ministers recommended its head Serhiy Kunitsin not to report to the parliament even if MPs insisted that he did. Kunitsin took the advice. Later on, he argued that President Kuchma also did not see any need in delivering the report. Three days after his meeting with Kuchma on June 18, Kunitsin publicly argued that «Leonid Kuchma sees no need in the report of the government of the ARC [i.e., the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea] that had to take place in the Verkhovna Rada of the autonomy on June 20» (Ukraina Moloda, June 21, 2001). Apparently, he managed to secure Kuchma's understanding of his line. According to Kunitsin, the future of the Crimean Prime Minister and the government «if the issue ever arises, will be solved by one person only: President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma».

Kunitsin's hopes that he will keep his job regardless of the parliament's vote is based on the fact that the final say on the matter belongs Leonid Kuchma: according to the Constitution of Ukraine, the Crimean premier can be dismissed only with the agreement of the President of Ukraine.

For instance, the previous attempt to dismiss the Crimean government, on May 24, 2000, was in vain due to the opinion of the President of Ukraine and a collision between the Crimean and the national legislation. Last year Crimean MPs voted 68 to 20 to dismiss the Kunitsin government, but President Kuchma was strongly against the initiative. Yet, in addition to Kuchma's attitude there were some provisions in the legislation that made it problematic for the Crimean parliament to get rid of the government. According to Article 136 of the Constitution of Ukraine, the head of the Council of Ministers of the Crimea is appointed and dismissed by the parliament of the Crimea with the approval of the President of Ukraine. No additional obligations or limitations for the head of the state in this matter are specified. Meanwhile, the Law on the Verkhovna Rada of the Crimea (paragraph 30 of Part 2 of Article 9) stipulates that should the parliament of the Crimea vote no-confidence to the head of the Council of Ministers and other members of the Crimean parliament by simple majority, the head of the government may be dismissed in accordance with the order specified by the Constitution. Yet, the law

provides that if the no-confidence vote is issued by at least two thirds of the parliament, the President should agree to the dismissal of the premier, thus, limiting the President's constitutional powers.

However, formally speaking, the decision of the Crimean parliament does not mean immediate and automatic dismissal of the government but is an appeal to the President of Ukraine that confirmed the parliament's verdicts of February 1, 2000 and May 24, 2000, evaluating the Crimean government's performance as «unsatisfactory» and demanding the change of its leadership. While the recent verdict simply reminds the President about the Crimean parliament's position, it is worth noting that speaking to the public after his visit to Simferopol on May 3 Leonid Kuchma, when asked about possible dismissal of the head of the Crimean Council of Ministers, said: «there is the Verkhovna Rada of the Crimea, and that is its eparchy» (UNIAN, May 3, 2001). After the parliament's criticism of Kunitsin and the crisis in the Crimean parliament one might interpret Leonid Kuchma's words as agreement to dismiss the head of the Crimean government. However, the situation appears to have changed after Kunitsin's meeting with Kuchma on June 18. On the day when the Crimean parliament voted no confidence to him, Kunitsin publicly stated that «... Kuchma sees no need of resignation of the Council of Ministers of the peninsula» (UNAIN, June 20, 2001). However, Kuchma himself did not make any explicit statements regarding the matter but announced he would handle the Crimean parliament's decision to dismiss the premier «only within the legal framework» (UNIAN, June 21, 2001). He also added that having received the petition of the Crimean parliament he had ordered his staff to study the matter in detail and find a solution. Yet, it is unclear what that solution will be. While last year Kunitsin's chances to keep the job were quite strong, currently the future of the Crimean government is far more clouded.

Meanwhile, Kunitsin's dismissal is likely to cause escalation of the conflict between Leonid Grach and representatives of Crimean Tatars. Last year, the Crimean Tatar issue was one of the aspects of the dismissal initiative. Then Leonid Grach tried to blame the parliament's decision on Refat Chubarov, MP, and Crimean Tatars who had protested massively to strengthen their demand for negotiations between the Crimean parliament and the Crimean Tatar Medjlis. According to Grach, last year the pro-Tatar position of Kunitsin and Refat Chubarov's radical statement provoked the left-wing majority for action. The explicit link made by Grach with regard Kunitsin and the Crimean Tatar issue illustrates the complexity of the situation. Since becoming the Prime Minister of the Crimea, Kunitsin has played a role of a «buffer» between Crimean Tatars and the leader of the Crimean parliament. If he is dismissed, the shaky parity can be ruined.

In 2000 the Crimean MPs who voted against the government were actively inspired to do so by the Crimea's former premier, member of the parliament of Ukraine Anatoly Franchuk. Yet, nowadays Franchuk seems to have other issues on his agenda, primarily in the field of his business interests. Among other things, the board of the Crimean state-owned oil and gas trader, JSC Chornomornaftogaz, has been scheduled to take place in July, and the corporation's Director General Nikolay Ilnitsky may find himself challenged far stronger than usually, notwithstanding consistent support of Speaker Grach. About a year ago Ilnitski publicly admitted that rumors about attempts to remove him from the leadership of the corporation were well-founded. Observers mentioned the name of former premier Franchuk's son, also a member of the Ukrainian parliament, Ihor Franchuk. Then Ilnitsky hinted: «I do not think that Ihor Anatoliovich [Franchuk] wanted to exchange his very convenient mandate of a member of parliament of Ukraine for a position as hard and damned as that of chairman of the board of the JSC Chornomornaftogaz (UNIAR, June 27, 2000). Apparently, nowadays Ihor Franchuk has much more realistic chances to change the job.

The current intrigue in the Crimean parliament has developed due to the involvement of other political forces. One of Ukraine's most ambitious and aggressive political parties, the Trudova Ukraina, has arrived to the Crimean political scene. Recently, the party has formed its 12-strong faction, the «Trudova Ukraina», in the Crimean parliament. The new entity announced its position with regard the Crimean government on the eve of the debates. A representative of the Crimean branch of the Trudova Ukraina, Vladimir Tuterov, was quoted by the press as saying «[I] believe the deputies, having gathered for the session, will make a decision on that issue. And the decision, obviously, will be negative for the government» (Den, June 19, 2001). Noteworthy, that position is shared by Crimean communists. The common situational interests of the Trudova Ukraina and followers of Crimean Speaker Grach resulted in the parliament's no-confidence vote to the government.

The position, taken by the Crimean branch of the Trudova Ukraina and its political implementation

may play a bad joke on the party. Some time ago the Trudova Ukraina and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) signed a cooperation agreement that was expected to transform into a joint centrist electoral block. The decision of the Crimean parliament and the Trudova Ukraina faction's role of one of its key players have already provoked a strongly negative reaction of the PDP. Crimean premier Serhiy Kunitsin is a member of the PDP political council, and until recently the party managed at least to maintain its influence in the peninsula.

On June 21 the PDP faction issued an appeal to the President of Ukraine urging him to study the situation in the Crimea and make a decision that would prevent confrontation and destabilization in the region. The statement emphasized that «during the session of the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC on June 20 the leadership of the VR, under explicit pressure of some deputies, resorted to overt violation of the protocol of performance of the autonomy's representative body of power.» According to the PDP, the Crimean parliament was convinced to consider the issue of the report of the Council of Ministers that had been debated by the parliament's presidium on June 5 without the procedure, required by the Ukrainian law and the parliament's protocol. Therefore, «members of the PDP faction believe that the appeal of the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC of June 20 does not have any legal grounds, as [it was] based on decisions of the Verkhovna Rada of the Crimea of February 1, 2000 and May 24, 2000, that were legitimately challenged and judged by the court as contradicting the current legislation» (UNIAN, June 21, 2001).

The statement of the People's Democratic Party contained rather strong comments addressed to the political forces that had sponsored the Crimean parliament's decision. Specifically, the document stated: «... recent developments in the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC demonstrate that for a substantial, politicized part of Crimean deputies led by Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC Leonid Grach personal political ambitions and clan interests are superior to interests of the peninsula.» Moreover, «the PDP stresses that, being unable to achieve their objective through a legal way, these forces, with support of some members of the parliament of Ukraine, have resorted to dirty tricks and a lobby plot with the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of the Crimea in order to capture the power in the peninsula before the 2002 elections to bodies of representative power at all levels.» The conclusion of the unequivocal statement is also quite blunt: «... actions of some members of the parliament of Ukraine - members of the Trudova Ukraina deputy group, and the unclear position of the leadership of the deputy group and the leadership of the Trudova Ukraina party raise a question about possibility to continue and deepen cooperation in the future» (UNIAN, June 21, 2001). The last statement may mean the announcement of political divorce between the PDP and the Trudova Ukraina.

The Crimean intrigue gradually discloses new political details. For instance, on the eve of the parliamentary session that resolved to dismiss the government the Crimean press published a statement that «The Trudova Ukraina party has never approved any decisions about the dismissal of the Crimean government. Statements of some members of the parliament who are members of the Trudova Ukraina faction and who insist on dismissing the current leadership of the Council of Ministers of the autonomy are their personal opinion» (Den, June 19, 2001). A similar statement was made by secretary of the Trudova Ukraina faction in the Crimean parliament Volodymyr Polishchuk, arguing that «the decision to judge the Kunitsin government's performance as unsatisfactory was approved by the faction's deputies without coordination with the party's central bodies (<http://part.org.ua>). He added that the party members in Kyiv had a rather 'vague idea about what is happening in the Crimea». However, it appears that at least some of the Trudova Ukraina members, particularly the ones coming from the Crimea, are well aware of the situation in the peninsula. For instance, on April 20 Serhiy Kunitsin referred to «active work» in the Crimean parliament, done by members of the Ukrainian parliament Lev Mirimsky and Valery Gorbатов «who [had] established the so-called faction of the Trudova Ukraina» (Den, June 21, 2001). According to Kunitsin, Valery Gorbатов and Lev Mirimsky were behind the recent developments in the political Crimea. «In the near future we are planning to publish a book about Mirimsky. This is a true bestseller» (Ukraina Moloda, June 22, 2001), Kunitsin, warned, probably hinting at a «critical mass» of compromising data about Mirimsky, MP, that have been gathered by his political competitors. Noteworthy, if Kunitsin resigns, Valery Gorbатов has a good chance to become the Crimea's next premier. Which would mean yet another re-division of political forces' control over the peninsula's administrative and financial resources and increase of instability in the Crimea at the start of the tourist season.

The attitude of the Trudova Ukraina may be designed to show force and influence but may also indicate certain differences among members of the Trudova Ukraina faction in Kyiv, which itself

shows weakness and lack of coordination - features that are damaging for the image of the party and its individual members. Since the Crimean parliament's appeal for the dismissal of Kunitsin the Trudova Ukraina has made no comments or statements. Paradoxically, but the accurate answer to the question about the Trudova Ukraina's ability to play murky Crimean political games and win may be given by the Ukrainian president, depending on his support or rejection of the Crimean parliament's appeal. In that case relations between the new allies, the PDP and the Trudova Ukraina, may be challenged with a crack that will be rather hard to overcome.

Meanwhile, the air of the political Crimea nowadays smells not only of «fried» rumor but also of the «old-new» «criminal revolution». At some point in the past it was announced that the process was finalized by the destruction of a local organized criminal group, «the Bashmaki», by them key police official of the Crimea Hennady Moskal, now the governor of the Transcarpathian region. However, according to some political forces of the peninsula, the old criminal confrontation is back on stage. For instance, members of the Crimean parliament Vasyl Kiseliov noted that the «revolution» in the Crimea had already taken place «under the leadership of Communists chaired by Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC Leonid Grach» (UNIAN, June 21, 2001). «With the help of members of the parliament of Ukraine Valery Gorbato and Lev Mirimsky, Leonid Grach at the session «squeezed» to the agenda all resolutions of the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC concerning privatization of state-owned property in the peninsula,» said Kiseliov. At his day, former Speaker of the Crimean parliament Vasyl Kiseliov was one of the initiators of an anti-crime coalition «MPs Against Crime and Corruption». The coalition was then joined by 32 MPs. The history appears to repeat itself, as the Crimean air - as well as the air of «continental» Ukraine - increasingly smells of elections. Therefore, processes of political instability caused and multiplied by political struggle are bound to escalate.